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CHAPTER 188



Massachusetts
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Program

March 1990

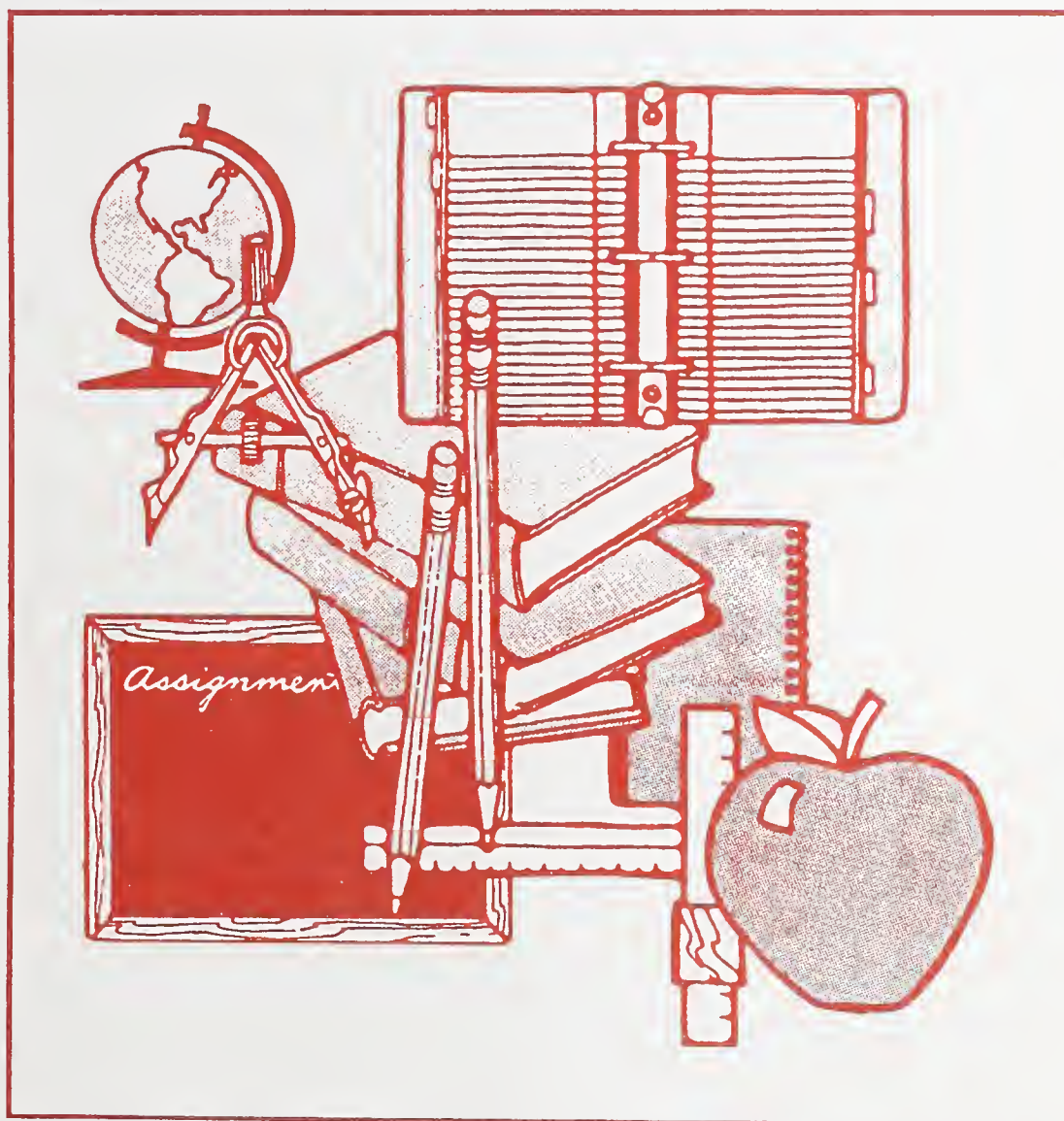
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MASSACHUSETTS BASIC SKILLS TESTS: 1989 RESULTS



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March 1990

**MASSACHUSETTS BASIC SKILLS TESTS:
1989 RESULTS**

Massachusetts Department of Education

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Executive Summary

The 1989 report of the Basic Skills Testing Program, authorized under Chapter 188 of the Acts of 1985, summarizes the test performance of all third, sixth and ninth grade students tested in reading, mathematics and writing. It also includes the test results for students in grades 10, 11 and 12 who had not previously met the Basic Skills standards. The report provides a three-year summary of test results and discusses questions relevant to possible adjustments in the Basic Skills Testing Program.

The purpose of Basic Skills Testing is to identify students who have not mastered basic skills. In 1989, 167,000 elementary and secondary students, representing 91 percent of the total enrollment in grades 3, 6 and 9, were eligible for testing during October 1989. The percentages of students who met or exceeded the standards of 65% correct in reading and mathematics and the required levels of proficiency in writing are summarized below:

	Reading	Mathematics	Writing
Grade 3	94.5%	94.5%	92.9%
Grade 6	88.3%	92.0%	95.2%
Grade 9	86.7%	88.3%	92.8%

In all but two instances, these passing rates represent an increase compared to 1988 figures. The 1989 percentages of eligible students passing all three Basic Skills tests showed increases over 1988 rates as shown below.

	1988	1989
Grade 3	87.5%	87.7%
Grade 6	82.8%	84.2%
Grade 9	78.6%	81.8%

Overall, 25,669 students (15% of those tested) did not pass one or more tests in 1989. In 1987, the figure was 20% of all students, and in 1988, 17%. This year, a smaller percentage and a smaller number of students did not pass one or more tests than in previous years.

The regulations governing the testing program require that secondary students who have not previously met Basic Skills standards continue to take the tests until the standards are met. In 1989, over 14,000 grades 10, 11 and 12 students were tested. Approximately 4700 of these did not meet the standard in 1989. This group will be retested in 1990.

Scores improved for students with particular background characteristics. Disadvantaged students continue to exhibit higher failure rates, however, than do other students.

The three years of comparable data generated by the Basic Skills Testing Program since 1987 provide information useful in evaluating a decade of state policy focused on basic skills mastery. Along with the results of an evaluation of the Massachusetts Testing Program, conducted last October, these data will provide insights for policy makers in determining what direction a basic skills policy should pursue.

Chapter 1: Introduction and Background to the Massachusetts Basic Skills Testing Program

Between October 2 and 20, 1989, 166,247 public school students in grades 3, 6 and 9 were tested in reading, writing and mathematics in the fourth annual administration of the Massachusetts Basic Skills Testing Program. The program, mandated by Chapter 188 of the Acts of 1985, was established to identify students who have not achieved mastery of the basic skills needed to participate successfully in regular grade classwork in those subjects.

The 1989 test administration was the third one completed under a state standard of 65 percent correct in the multiple-choice reading and mathematics tests and a level of skill identified by the Massachusetts Board of Education as the standard for writing. As in 1988, secondary students who had not previously passed any Basic Skills test(s) were required to take the test(s) until they met the state standard.

Purpose of the Basic Skills Testing Program

To fulfill its purpose of "identifying students who have not achieved mastery of basic skills," the program uses test questions that are easy for most students of average and above-average skill; they discriminate between students who have mastered basic skills and those who have not. The tests do not distinguish more finely among levels of basic skills competence.

Virtually all students in grades 3, 6 and 9 are tested. Exemptions are limited to:

- students who are incapable of performing ordinary classwork in English as determined by the English Language Proficiency Assessment and who have been enrolled in transitional bilingual education programs for fewer than three full years, unless a written request was submitted by the parent that the student be tested;
- special education students if exemptions were requested by the parent either in writing or as part of the TEAM process.

The number of students who were eligible for and exempt from testing in October 1989 is summarized in tables included on pages 6 through 11.

Test Development and Administration

All questions used in the Massachusetts Basic Skills Tests were developed for the program. Objectives were established during 1986-87, based on the advice of committees of teachers and curriculum specialists and results of a school survey. A large pool of possible test questions that measure those objectives was field tested by students in Massachusetts at three different times. From that pool, each year's Basic Skills tests are constructed by selecting test questions that cover the range of objectives and meet the difficulty level established by the Board of Education. All tests have been reviewed by an equity concerns committee to ensure that they are fair to students of all backgrounds.

Grades 10, 11 and 12 students tested this year followed the same schedule and administration procedures and used the same materials as grade 9 students. The results of this portion of the testing program are reported on the student level. The results are not aggregated for schools or districts, however, because retesting affects primarily individual students. Because of the difficulty of tracking a population of students in the state from year to year, any attempt to provide aggregate or comparative statistics between years or classes could lead to inaccurate and misleading comparisons.

Reporting of Results

Basic Skills test results are reported in two primary ways: individual student reports, the focus of the program, are sent to schools and districts in January following testing; aggregate school and district reports are provided in March.

Chapter 188 allows local school districts to set standards higher than those established by the Board. Typically, higher local standards have been officially used by a small number of school districts. For 1987, 1988 and 1989, the following numbers of districts selected higher standards as shown:

Standard	Number of Districts 1987	Number of Districts 1988	Number of Districts 1989
70%	14	11	12
75%	4	4	2
80%	7	5	2

Uses of Test Results

The purpose and design of the Basic Skills Testing Program affords differing interpretations of test results, depending on the extent of basic skills problems in any school

or district. Most school districts in Massachusetts have a large percentage of students who pass all Basic Skills tests and a very small number who do not. In these districts, the most appropriate response to the results occurs on a case-by-case basis. Non-passing students are evaluated individually and appropriate modifications made to their programs if necessary.

Some schools and districts have a more extensive problem with their students' basic skills mastery. When compared to others, these districts have a relatively small percentage of students passing the tests and substantially larger numbers of students who fail. In some of these situations, it may be appropriate to consider programmatic rather than individual responses to Basic Skills results.

Other factors affecting the interpretation of Basic Skills test results are the grade levels tested and the time of testing in October of each school year. In some instances, students had been enrolled in a school for no more than a month at the time they were tested. At least for these schools, attempting to relate test results to an evaluation of the school's program would be inappropriate.

For example, vocational schools' results are based on testing students who had been previously enrolled in a number of different schools and had typically no more than two weeks of instruction at the vocational school. For these schools, the results define the extent of the basic skills problem the school must face. Any evaluation of the school's program, based on these results, would be inaccurate.

The Basic Skills Testing Program helps to establish a level of achievement that all students in Massachusetts schools should attain. It represents an attempt to ensure that no student will fall below this minimum level of achievement in reading, mathematics and writing. The most legitimate use of test results supports this effort to help students.

Chapter 2: 1989 Results

The following charts present statewide results for the 1989 Basic Skills tests. Comparable statistics are provided for grades 3, 6 and 9. Two different types of statistics are included; each type offers one perspective on students' performance. Both are useful for an improved understanding of Basic Skills results.

The first set of statistics describes the performance of eligible students on each test. Since Chapter 188 states that "the board shall annually test all students" at particular grade levels, the reporting categories account for all students reported as enrolled by the schools and districts. Every student reported as enrolled is accounted for by one of the following four categories:

1. **Exempt:** an enrolled student who was exempted from the test in accordance with program criteria.

All other students are eligible to be tested and their results may show:

2. **Pass:** an enrolled student who scored above the state standard;
3. **Fail:** an enrolled student who scored below the state standard;
4. **Unknown:** an enrolled student who did not take the test or whose test was unscorable.

At each grade level, the results show the distribution of students in each category for each subject tested. These statistics are useful in addressing questions such as "How many sixth grade students have demonstrated mastery of basic skills in each one of the Basic Skills tests?"

This type of information, however, does not provide a total picture of Basic Skills performance. It does not describe how many students have demonstrated mastery of basic skills in all three subject areas. For example, if each test has a ten percent failure rate, it is important to know whether:

- the same ten percent of students failed all three tests;
- the ten percent failure rate in each subject represents completely different students; or
- the true situation lies somewhere between these extremes.

The second group of statistics — the number of tests passed — helps to clarify this issue, answering questions such as, "How many sixth grade students have demonstrated mastery of all of the basic skills?"

GRADE 3

BASIC SKILLS TEST RESULTS

1989

READING

Number of Students		
Total Enrollment	63,895	
Total Exemptions	5,545	
Special Education	2,675	
Bilingual	2,870	
Eligible to be tested	58,350	

Students Eligible to be Tested		
	Number	Percentage
Pass	55,140	94.5%
Fail	3,005	5.2%
Unknown	205	0.4%

MATHEMATICS

Number of Students		
Total Enrollment	63,895	
Total Exemptions	5,350	
Special Education	2,483	
Bilingual	2,867	
Eligible to be tested	58,545	

Students Eligible to be Tested		
	Number	Percentage
Pass	55,311	94.5%
Fail	2,981	5.1%
Unknown	253	0.4%

WRITING

Number of Students		
Total Enrollment	63,895	
Total Exemptions	5,576	
Special Education	2,705	
Bilingual	2,871	
Eligible to be tested	58,319	

Students Eligible to be Tested		
	Number	Percentage
Pass	54,163	92.9%
Fail	3,587	6.2%
Unknown	569	1.0%
Blank	155	0.3%
Too Brief	210	0.4%
Off Topic	61	0.1%

Passed Tests		
	Number	Percentage
Passed all 3 tests	51,085	87.7%
Passed 2 tests	4,677	8.0%
Passed 1 test	1,563	2.7%
Passed 0 tests	897	1.5%

- Passing rates on the grade 3 tests ranged from 92.9% to 94.5%.
- 12.3% of the students did not pass one or more tests.

GRADE 6

BASIC SKILLS TEST RESULTS

1989

READING

Number of Students		
Total Enrollment	58,885	
Total Exemptions	4,493	
Special Education	3,083	
Bilingual	1,410	
Eligible to be tested	54,392	

Students Eligible to be Tested		
	Number	Percentage
Pass	48,013	88.3%
Fail	6,021	11.1%
Unknown	358	0.7%

MATHEMATICS

Number of Students		
Total Enrollment	58,885	
Total Exemptions	4,398	
Special Education	3,000	
Bilingual	1,398	
Eligible to be tested	54,487	

Students Eligible to be Tested		
	Number	Percentage
Pass	50,136	92.0%
Fail	3,970	7.3%
Unknown	381	0.7%

WRITING

Number of Students		
Total Enrollment	58,885	
Total Exemptions	4,546	
Special Education	3,130	
Bilingual	1,416	
Eligible to be tested	54,339	

Students Eligible to be Tested		
	Number	Percentage
Pass	51,755	95.2%
Fail	1,902	3.5%
Unknown	682	1.3%
Blank	226	0.4%
Too Brief	86	0.2%
Off Topic	95	0.2%
No Final Draft	6	0.0%

Passed Tests		
	Number	Percentage
Passed all 3 tests	45,640	84.2%
Passed 2 tests	5,007	9.2%
Passed 1 test	2,504	4.6%
Passed 0 tests	1,030	1.9%

- Passing rates on the grade 6 tests ranged from 88.3% to 95.2%; passing rates were highest in writing and lowest in reading.
- 15.8% of the students did not pass one or more tests.

GRADE 9

BASIC SKILLS TEST RESULTS

1989

READING

Number of Students		
Total Enrollment	60,115	
Total Exemptions	5,200	
Special Education	3,430	
Bilingual	1,770	
Eligible to be tested	54,915	

Students Eligible to be Tested		
	Number	Percentage
Pass	47,591	86.7%
Fail	5,529	10.1%
Unknown	1,795	3.3%

MATHEMATICS

Number of Students		
Total Enrollment	60,115	
Total Exemptions	5,115	
Special Education	3,350	
Bilingual	1,765	
Eligible to be tested	55,000	

Students Eligible to be Tested		
	Number	Percentage
Pass	48,552	88.3%
Fail	4,456	8.1%
Unknown	1,992	3.6%

WRITING

Number of Students	
Total Enrollment	60,115
Total Exemptions	5,184
Special Education	3,411
Bilingual	1,773
Eligible to be tested	54,931

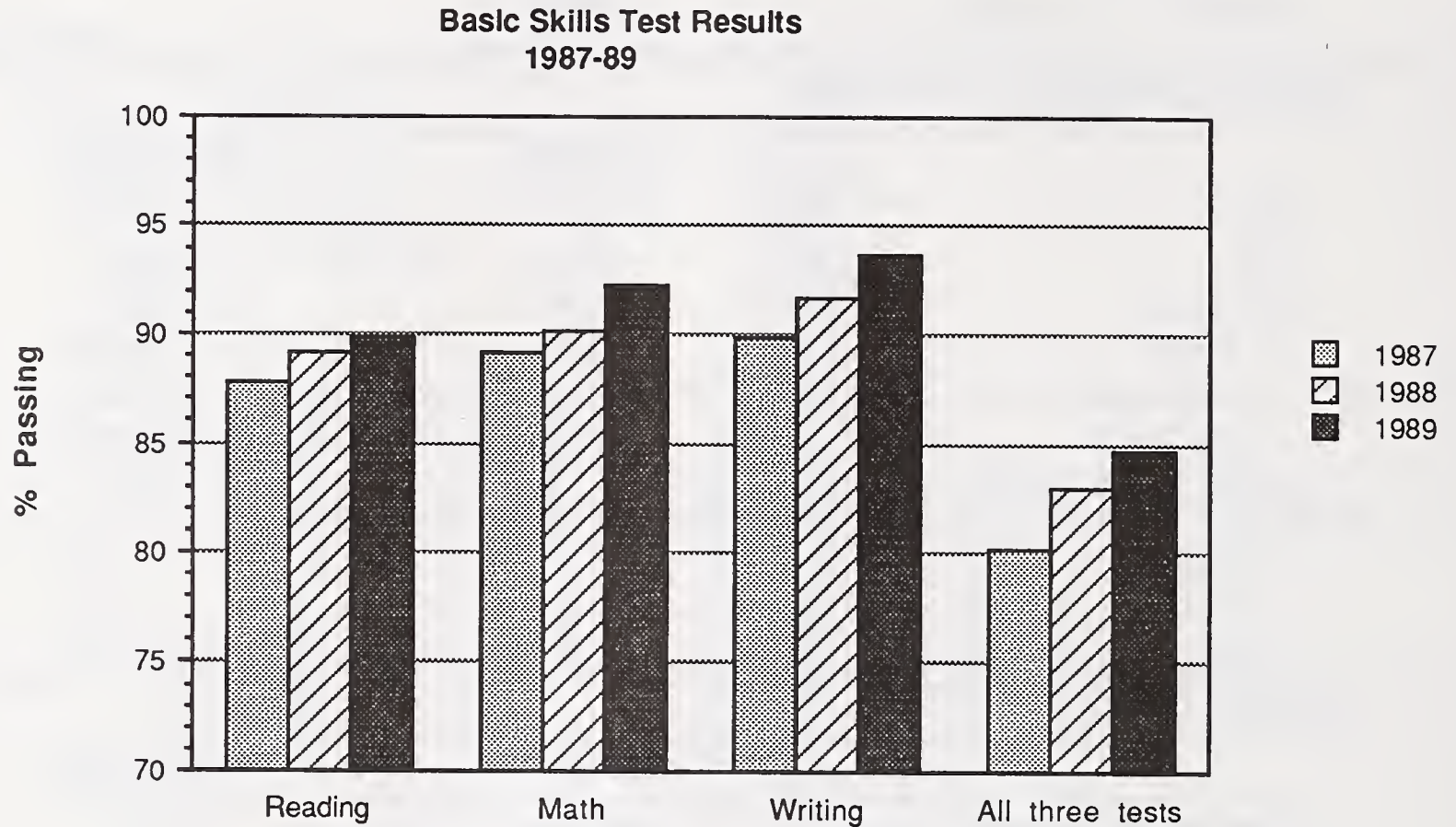
Students Eligible to be Tested		
	Number	Percentage
Pass	50,960	92.8%
Fail	1,494	2.7%
Unknown	2,477	4.5%
Blank	899	1.2%
Too Brief	111	0.2%
Off Topic	12	0.0%
No Final Draft	9	0.0%

Passed Tests		
	Number	Percentage
Passed all 3 tests	44,737	81.8%
Passed 2 tests	4,831	8.8%
Passed 1 test	2,736	5.0%
Passed 0 tests	2,419	4.4%

- Passing rates on the grade 9 tests ranged from 86.7% to 90.8%; passing rates were highest in writing.
- 18.3% of the students did not pass one or more tests.

Three-year Summary

The Basic Skills Testing Program has generated comparable data since 1987. The three years of results are presented in the following graph:

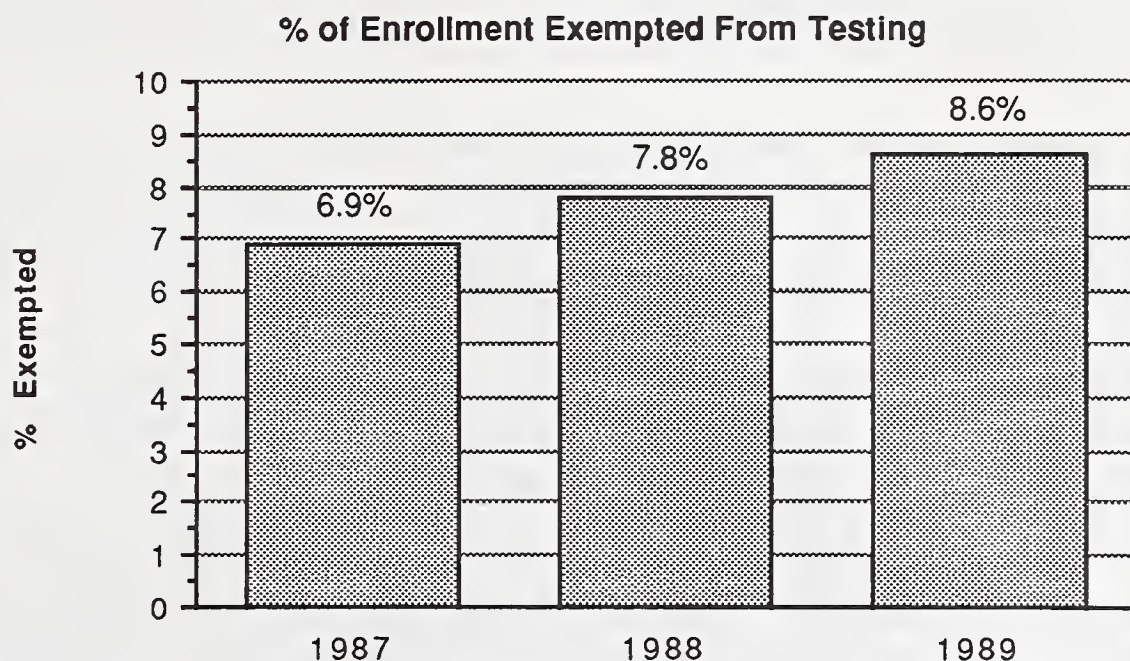


Performance improved for most categories of students. Students with demographic characteristics that have been associated with lower performance in the past showed slightly higher passing rates in 1989. For example, scores went up among minority students, students in urban areas and students whose parents have less education.

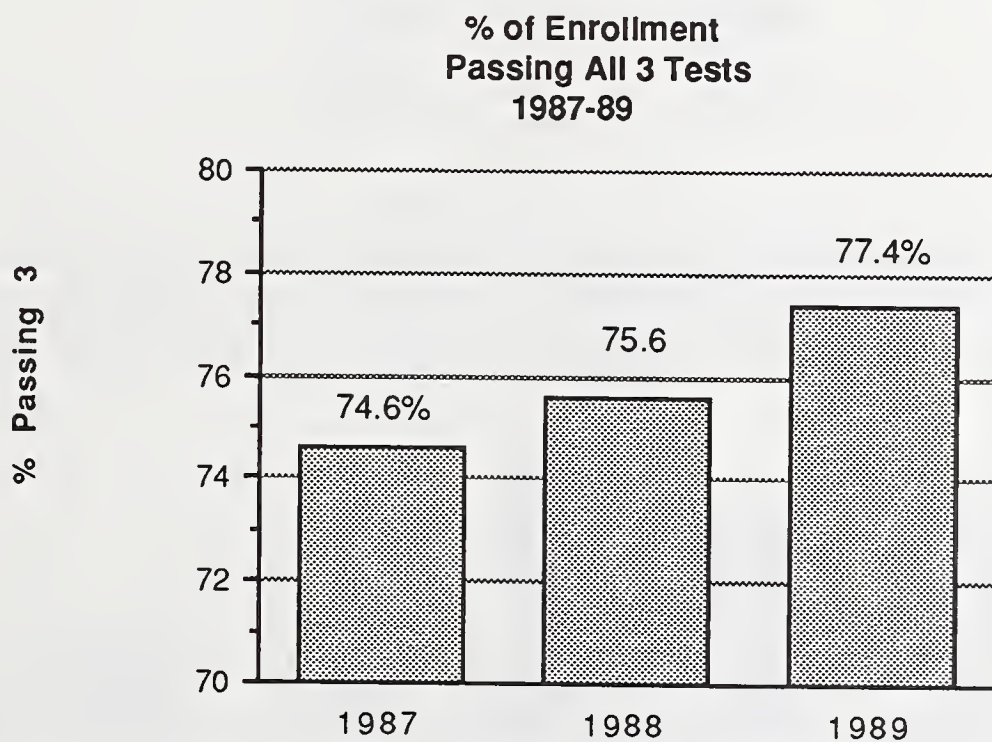
Their passing rates, however, continued to be substantially (15-20 percentage points) below that of students who do not have these demographic characteristics and they continue to be disproportionately represented among students who do not pass one or more Basic Skills tests.

In all areas, passing rates have improved over the three-year period. Each year, a higher percentage of students has met state standards in each subject. In addition, the percentage of students passing all tests has increased every year. In absolute terms, the number of students who have not met standards has declined even though enrollment has gone up.

It is important to note that the number and percentage of students exempted from testing have increased since 1987, as the graph below shows. The percentage of students eligible for all three tests has declined from 93.1% of the enrollment in 1987 to 91.4% in 1989.



Some of the improvement in passing rates over the past three years is probably due to more students being exempted from testing. However, as shown below, the percentage of the total enrollment that has passed all three tests has also gone up since 1987.



Students in Grades 10, 11 or 12

The Regulations for the Massachusetts Testing Program require that students who did not meet state standards on a Basic Skills test as ninth graders must continue to take the test until a passing score is achieved. High school students who were or who would have been ninth graders after October 1987 and who did not meet state standards were required to take the test last October.

In 1989, this group included tenth, eleventh and a small number of twelfth grade students who did not pass tests in either 1987 or 1988. Students who transferred into Massachusetts public high schools after October 1987 but who would have been eligible to be tested if they had been enrolled were also required to take the tests.

Over 14,100 students participated in this portion of the Basic Skills Testing Program. Students took tests in only those subject areas in which they had not previously met the state standards. Tenth, eleventh and twelfth grade students who were tested were asked to indicate whether they had been a student in their present school during the 1988-89 school year. Those who responded that they were in the school last year were most likely students who did not pass the test(s) last year and were taking it again. Students who reported they were not in the school last year are more likely to be transfer students who are taking the test(s) for the first time. Passing percentages in each subject for students who were attending the same school as last year were as follows:

Subject	Number of Students Tested	Percentage Passing
Reading	5,028	64.5%
Mathematics	4,639	70.3%
Writing	2,763	85.4%

Passing rates for students who were not attending the same school as last year were 82% in reading, 86% in mathematics and 92% in writing. Just over 4700 students in grades 10, 11 and 12 have not yet met Basic Skills standards and will be required to take the test(s) again next year.

Students in Opportunity Schools

Chapter 727 of the Acts of 1987 established a program designed to assist schools serving large numbers of at-risk students. A group of "Opportunity Schools" was identified on the basis of performance on the 1987 Basic Skills tests and targeted for special attention.

The statute outlined a number of steps that each targeted school would undertake:

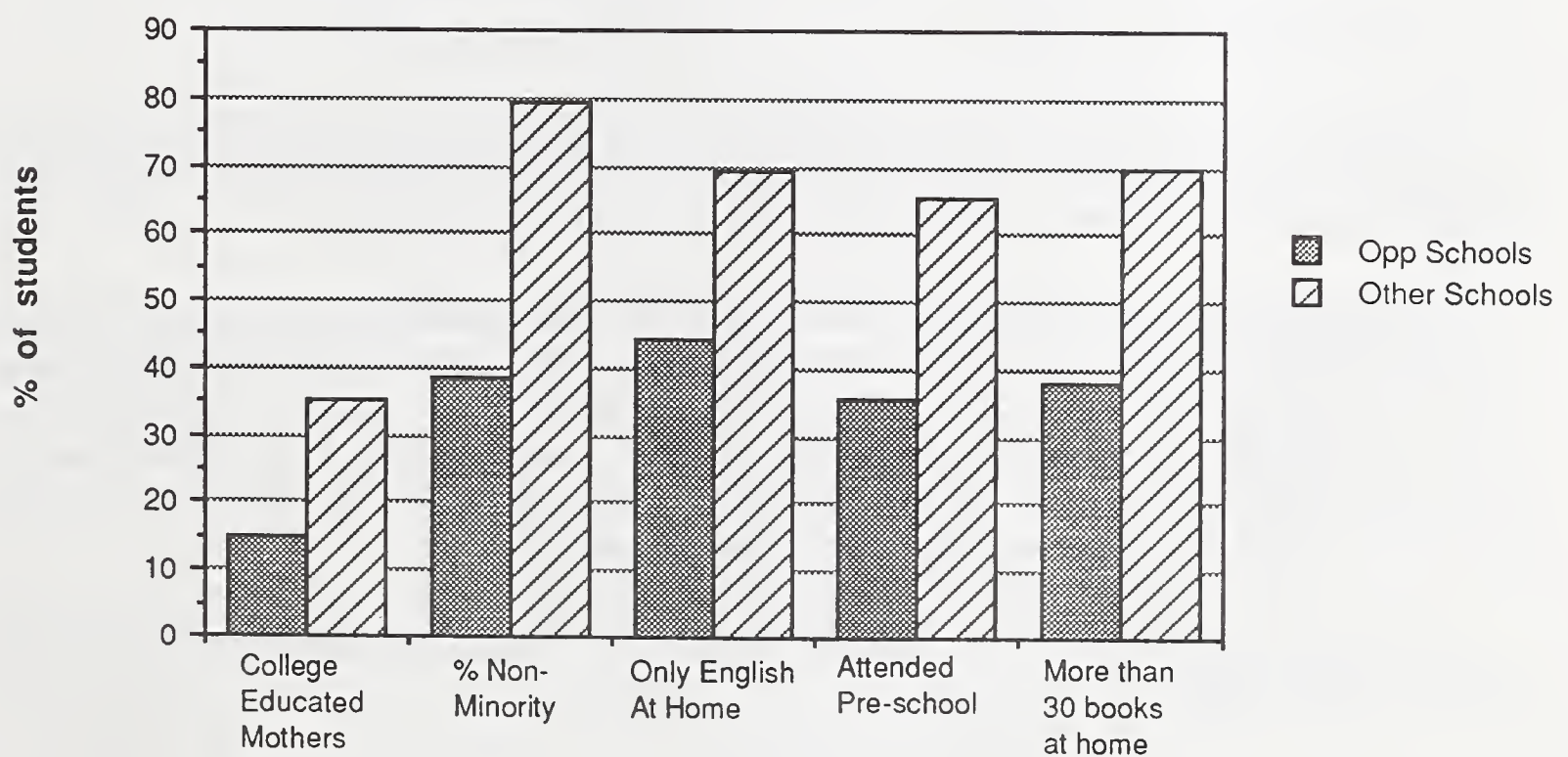
1. expand the School Improvement Council to include a representative from outside the school;
2. develop a school plan focused on school improvement;
3. submit annual reports on the school's progress.

Schools were identified as Opportunity Schools if their performance on the 1987 Basic Skills tests at a particular grade level was in the bottom quarter of all schools on all three tests. Because the statute defines Opportunity Schools as elementary, middle and junior high schools, only a very few schools were eligible on the basis of their ninth grade test results. All but four of the 167 Opportunity Schools are schools containing grade 3 or grade 6, or both.

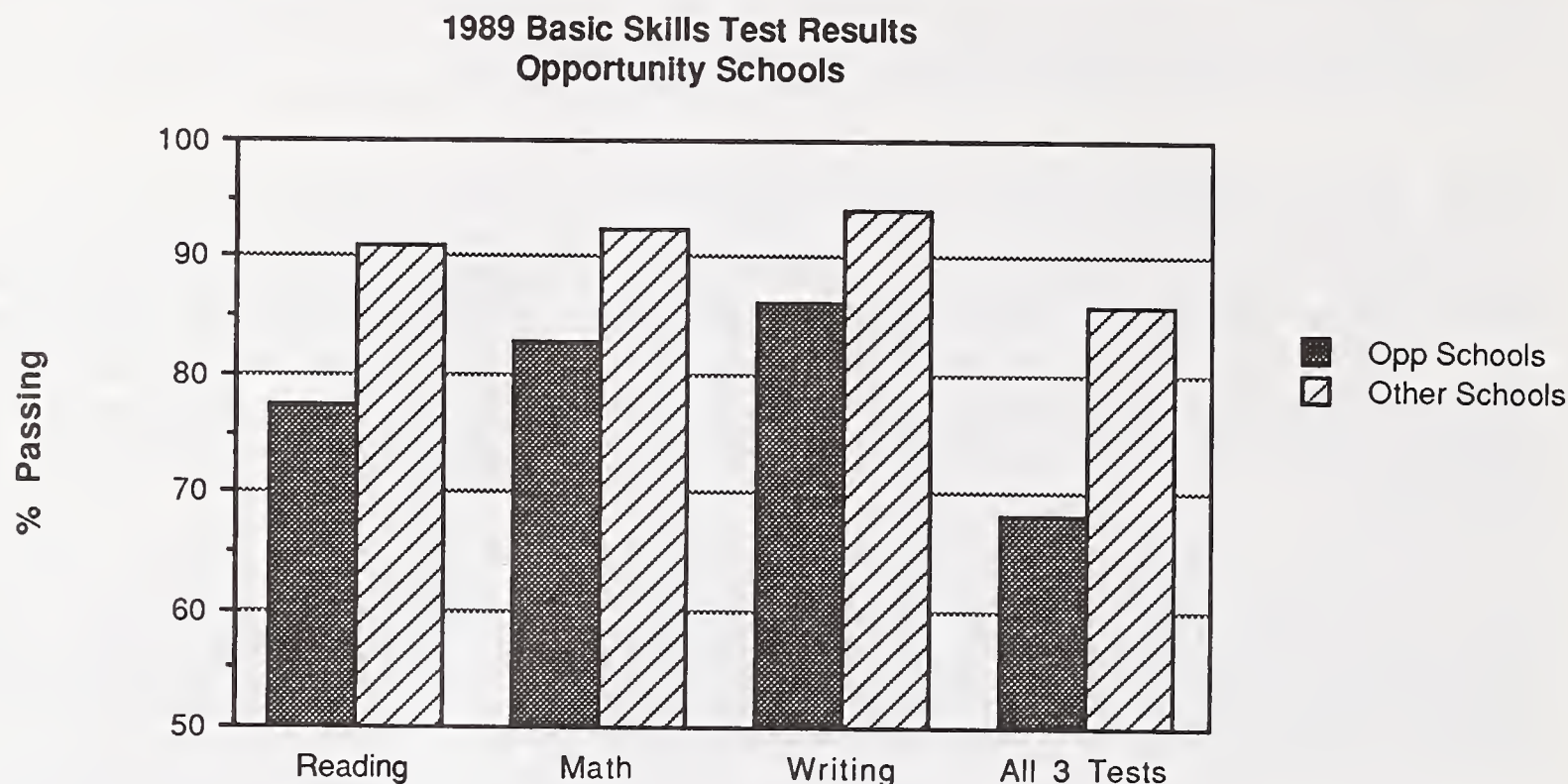
Selecting schools on the basis of a single set of test scores may not identify those with the most challenging problems overall. However, as has been reported in the past, Opportunity Schools serve students with substantial disadvantage, and improving basic skills mastery likely is not the only challenge these schools face.

As the graph below shows, students in the Opportunity Schools have very different demographic characteristics compared to students in other schools.

**Background Characteristics
Students In Opportunity Schools**



The difference in the extent of basic skills mastery between students in Opportunity Schools and those in other schools is substantial. The passing rate in Opportunity Schools remains well below that of students in other schools.



The passing rates for the Opportunity School students have improved since 1987, as the chart below shows.

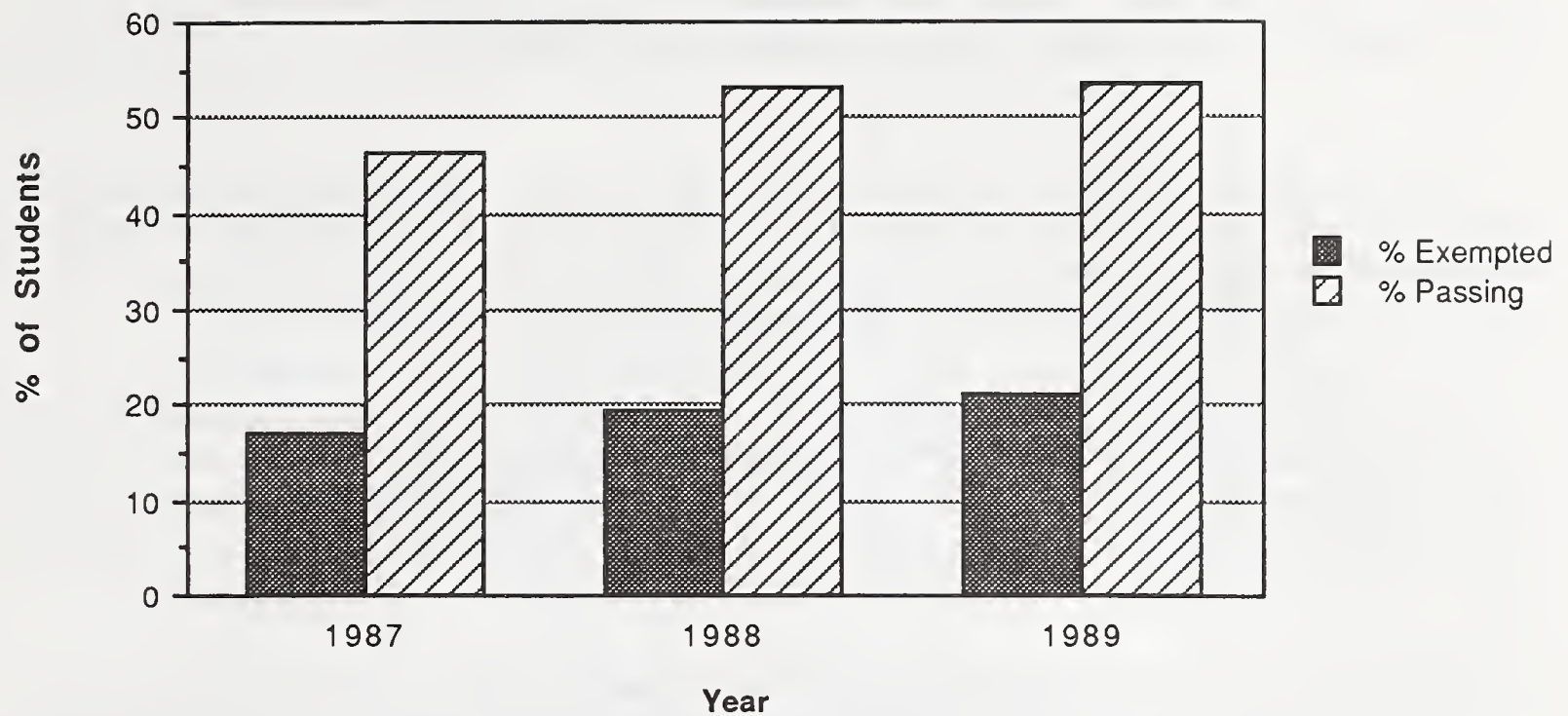
	1987	1988	1989
Passed all Three Tests	56%	66%	68%

The rate of exemptions has also increased for Opportunity School students, as it has for the student population as a whole. In 1987, 17% of the students enrolled in Opportunity Schools were exempted from testing; in 1989, the figure was 21%.

The passing rate expressed as a percentage of the total enrollment shows how much the change in the exemption rate has affected test results. Even if the exemption rate increased, if the percentage of the enrollment that passes the Basic Skills tests also increases, some real improvement in performance has occurred. If the percentage of the enrollment passing the tests does not increase in this situation, it is reasonable to conclude that any improvement shown in the nominal passing rate is artificial.

The graph on the following page illustrates how these figures have related to one another since 1987.

**% of Enrollment Passing All Three Tests or
Exempted - Opportunity Schools**



Between 1987 and 1988, the exemption rate went up by 2.4 percentage points. The percentage of the enrollment passing all three tests went up by 6.9 points. Between 1988 and 1989, the exemption rate increased by 1.6 points and the passing rate went up by .4 points. These figures indicate that improvement did occur each year, but that the 1989 improvement is very slight.

Chapter 3:

Basic Skills Mastery as State Policy

Over the past ten years, the Massachusetts Board of Education has overseen a statewide policy directed toward mastery of basic skills for all students. This effort can be viewed as an attempt to deliver on an implied guarantee that all students will achieve at least a particular minimal level of basic skills in the public schools of the state.

Direct involvement in achievement of individual students is a unique feature of basic skills policy in Massachusetts. Student achievement has traditionally been a matter of local control and remains so in most other areas. No statewide graduation requirements exist, nor does any mandated curriculum content. However, since 1979, the Board of Education has established a goal that all students in the state will achieve basic skills mastery.

This goal has been pursued under two different policy models, each involving testing as a way to help ensure that all students achieve this mastery. The first, the Basic Skills Improvement Policy, was established in 1979. Under this policy, districts tested students in reading, writing, mathematics and listening at one early elementary, one later elementary and one secondary grade chosen by the district. At the elementary levels, each district developed its own set of objectives, selected a test instrument, and determined the passing standard. At the secondary level, each district was required to incorporate state-identified objectives, choose one of several state-approved tests or a state-developed test, and set its own local minimum passing standard for its students.

The 1979 policy was designed, in part, to allow districts more local control in the testing program and to avoid inappropriate comparisons among districts in the state. As test results were reported, however, these features were sometimes perceived as inadequacies. The lack of comparable data available from the basic skills program made it difficult to determine how much progress was being made toward the goal of basic skills mastery for all students.

In 1985, as part of the "Act Improving the Public Schools of the Commonwealth" (Chapter 188), the Basic Skills Testing Program was established. This policy switched control of many aspects of basic skills testing from local districts to the state. State objectives in reading, mathematics and writing were defined for grades 3, 6 and 9. State tests and statewide passing standards were developed which allowed uniform reporting of results.

Although these two policies have very different characteristics, their purpose was the same — to ensure that all Massachusetts students achieve mastery of basic skills. The fundamental differences in the character of the two policies prevent any clear evaluation of how much progress has been made since 1979. (It is interesting to note, however, that the passing rates in reading and mathematics for secondary students were at about the same level in 1980 as they were in 1989.)

The last three years of testing under the current policy, however, have produced comparable data that allow examination of the question "How well have Massachusetts students mastered basic skills?" The data provide conflicting answers.

On the positive side:

- a modest improvement in the passing rate has occurred in each subject and at almost all grade levels over the past three years;
- the number of students who did not pass one or more tests has decreased steadily since 1987;
- failure rates in each subject area have declined; failure rates in writing are less than 5% at some grade levels.

On the negative side:

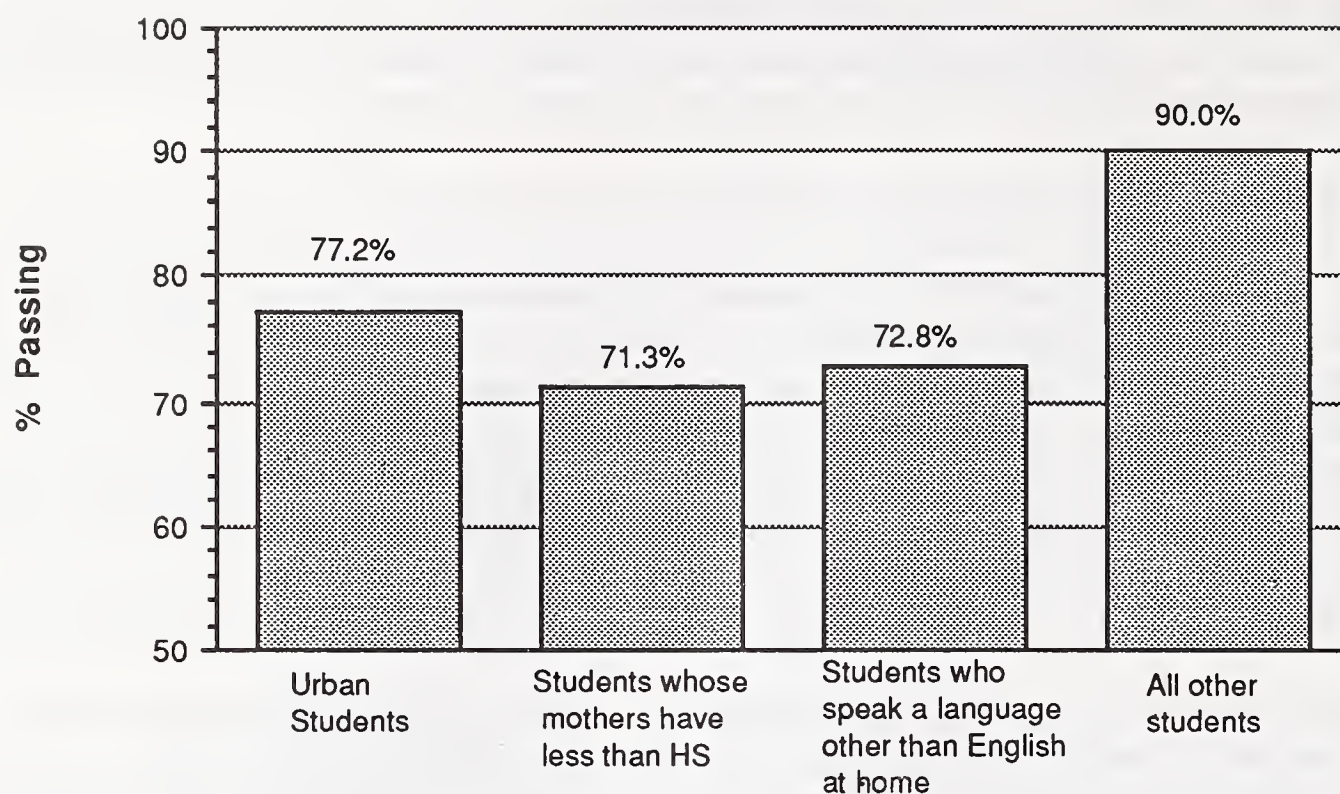
- one out of every seven students eligible for testing in these three grades did not pass one or more tests in 1989 — approximately 25,700 students;
- in 1989, only 77% of the students enrolled in grades 3, 6 and 9 passed all three basic skills tests;
- estimating from these figures, approximately 85,000 of the 823,000 public school students in grades 1-12 may not possess sufficient mastery of basic skills to be successful in regular grade classwork.

The interpretation of these figures depends on how a state basic skills policy is viewed. From one perspective, the fact that the vast majority of students have passed all Basic Skills tests can be interpreted to mean that the current policy is no longer needed and, perhaps, a more appropriate policy should be developed.

From another viewpoint, however, the fact that 25,700 third, sixth and ninth grade students and 4700 students who were tested at other secondary grade levels have not yet demonstrated basic skills mastery can be interpreted to mean that the identification of students at "academic risk" should continue.

Whatever the viewpoint, one persistent fact over the past ten years under the two policy models cannot be ignored — the continued low performance of students whose parents have lower educational levels, who live in cities, or who speak a language other than English at home. The graph on page 20 illustrates this point.

**1989 Basic Skills Results
% of Students Passing 3 Tests**



After ten years of statewide attention to basic skills mastery, the Basic Skills Testing Program is at a crossroads: new tests will be needed by 1992. This need provides an opportunity to evaluate the nature, purpose and direction of the testing program and make adjustments as necessary or desired. Two related questions are fundamental to any discussion of basic skills policy:

- Should the current practice of testing the basic skills mastery of all students be maintained?
 - If the answer is no, then what other mechanisms should be instituted to ensure that students who have not achieved basic skills mastery are identified and responded to appropriately?
 - If the answer is yes, how should the policy confront the fact that 85% of the eligible students demonstrate basic skills mastery as presently defined?
- Should the acceptable level of basic skills mastery be raised?
 - If the answer is yes, what are the consequences for those students who cannot pass the tests at the current level?
 - If the answer is no, how can the basic skills mastery standard be reconciled with the literacy requirements of an increasingly demanding technological world?

The evaluation of the Massachusetts Testing Program currently being conducted by the Department of Education addresses these issues. The evaluation included survey responses from over 26,000 school staff. Later this year, the Board of Education will receive a report on this survey along with recommendations from both the Department of Education and the Advisory Committee to the Massachusetts Testing Program. The discussion of this report will be the first step in defining the Commonwealth's basic skills policy for the future.

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